

# CITY & TOWN REPORT

A summary of the best stories in all seven of today's local editions. Some stories may be repeated on your local pages.

## Absent from school? Tell it to the judge

BY SUZANNAH GONZALES  
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

NEWPORT — Some kids said they overslept and missed the bus. Some said they got picked on. Others said they just didn't feel like going.

Whatever the reason for missing school this year, Family Court Magistrate Jeanne L. Shepard told the youngsters that they had to go — starting right after court or the next morning, and until the last day of school, June 19.

"You are to get up when your mom gets you up, get dressed, brush your teeth, have breakfast, go to school," she said to one sixth grade boy. "Kids have jobs. Yours is to go to school."

The law requires you to go to school until age 16, she told some. Only a doctor's note can excuse you from school, she said. Even if you are sick, she advised, go to school and get excused by the school nurse.

In an effort to keep kids in school and out of trouble, Family Truancy Court made its debut in Newport yesterday with city, school, state court officials and state legislators present for the first session.

Family Truancy Court began a year ago in Rhode Island, after 94-percent of the juveniles seen in Family Court in 1999 were found to be truant, said Chief Judge

### NEWPORT

Jeremiah S. Jeremiah.

If the child is occupied with school, they are less likely to commit an offense, he said.

Truancy Court is an opportunity to intervene at a younger age before the child enters the higher court system, Shepard said. It's not only about attendance, she said, but also about behavior and academic performance.

Four other truancy courts are located in schools in Central Falls, Woonsocket, Pawtucket and Providence.

The Newport court is primarily

for middle school students. Until construction is completed at Thompson Middle School in September 2002, court will be held in the Boys & Girls Club of Newport County at 95 Church St.

In the Newport schools, missing more than 15 days is considered a truancy problem, said Eddie Merritt Jr., student attendance facilitator. Of the school system's 3,000 students, 220 have truancy problems, he said.

The 16 students who went before Shepard yesterday with their parents had missed from 20 to 130 days in the 180-day school year.

What Shepard advised varied from child to child. To those who

started attending school again, she said to keep it up.

She urged some to speak up and tell someone at school if they were having problems with other kids.

To others, she said if they didn't show up to truancy court next week, she'd issue a warrant for their arrest. Or she would remove them from their homes and put them in a shelter away from Aquidneck Island. For truancy, a judge can't order incarceration, she said.

All their cases were continued until the next court session Wednesday and will remain open until the new school year begins in September.